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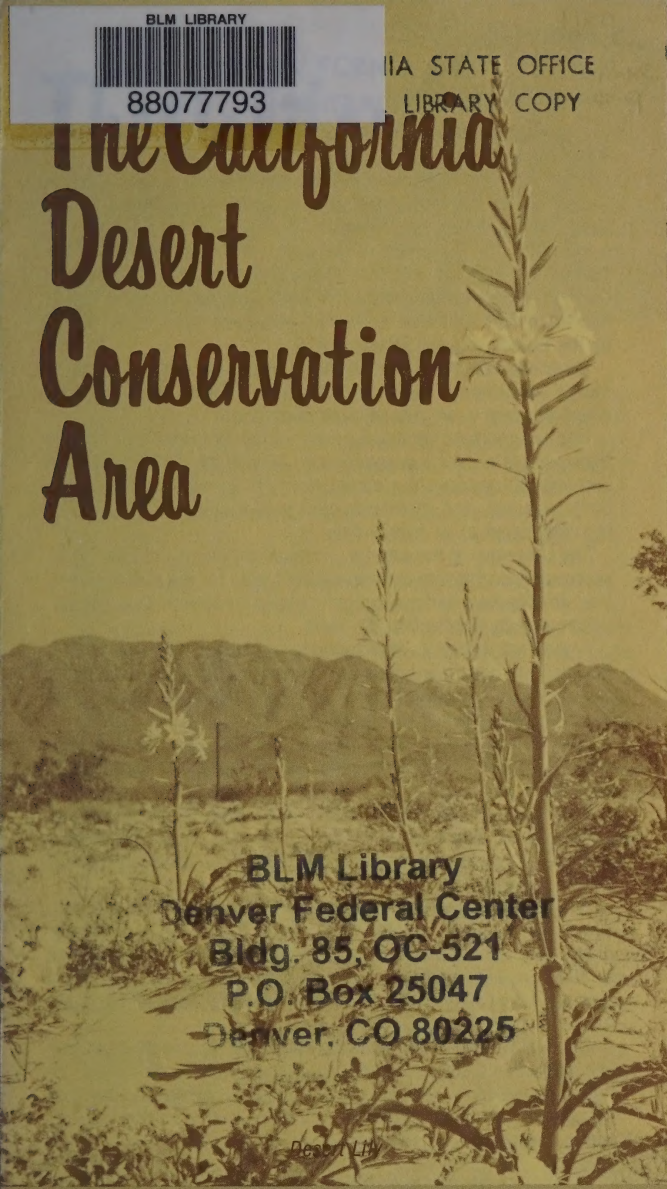
# The California Desert Conservation Area



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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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# CALIFORNIA DESERT CONSERVATION AREA

Congress established the California Desert Conservation Area in 1976 with the goal of providing "for the immediate and future protection and administration of the public lands in the California Desert within the framework of a program of multiple-use and sustained yield, and the maintenance of environmental quality."

Provision for the desert conservation area was included in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-579), sometimes called the "BLM Organic Act." Approximately half the desert land area is National Resource Land administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

Congress noted that the California Desert contains a variety of natural, cultural and economic resources "that are uniquely located adjacent to an area of large population."

The two-pronged approach begun earlier by the Bureau of Land Management's desert program was incorporated into the law. It consists of concurrent elements of: (1) comprehensive, long-range planning, and (2) interim critical management actions pending completion of an overall plan.

The Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Land Management, is to prepare and implement a plan for the management, use, development and protection of public lands within the conservation area by September 30, 1980.

A program of interim management to manage, use and protect the National Resource Lands and "their resources now in danger of destruction" is authorized for the period between passage of the Act and completion of the long-range plan.

The law provided for a California Desert Conservation Area Advisory Committee to advise BLM on development and implementation of the plan.

A program of law enforcement, including a uniformed desert ranger force, also was authorized; and search and rescue was made an assigned mission of BLM where no other emergency forces are available.

The California Desert Conservation Area contains some 25 million acres, or about one-fourth of the land surface of California. About 12½ million acres is National Resource Land administered by BLM, in addition to approximately 3 million acres of military reservations and more than 2½ million acres of national and state park lands.

The enabling Act said the use of all California Desert resources can and should be managed "to conserve these resources for future generations, and to provide present and future use and enjoyment, particularly outdoor recreation uses, including the use, where appropriate, of off-road recreational vehicles."

## RECREATION PRESSURE

The most readily apparent pressure on the desert is mass recreation, most of it involving recreational vehicles. Use of the desert has been increasing rapidly, and BLM trend counts indicate it has more than tripled since the Bureau's initial desert study in 1968.

BLM has achieved management of organized off-road vehicle use through a requirement, initiated in 1972, that sponsors of these events obtain special use permits. An interim plan for management of all recreational vehicle use was developed in 1973 with widespread public involvement. It was revised in 1974 and will be modified in the future as part of the total California Desert Plan.

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*BLM Ranger Station*

## PLANNING SHIFT

The tight deadline established by the 1976 Act of Congress required a shift from unit-by-unit planning to a process that considers the entire desert. Inventories utilizing such Space Age techniques as satellite imagery and remote sensing are being utilized to develop data for the plan. There will be separate resource inventories for geology-energy-minerals, botanical resources, soil-water-air, recreation, wildlife and cultural resources. Data collection will occupy the first two years of the four-year planning program, followed by a plan preparation phase. Data will be stored in automated data processing equipment for efficient retrieval. Socio-economic elements of the plan will be developed concurrently with the resource elements. These will focus on desert population, sources of income and employment, and the economics of such activities as livestock grazing, mineral-energy production, agriculture, recreation, the military and education and research. Alternative future studies will consider emerging forces such as solar energy, increasing population and urbanization, the desert as a takeoff and landing area for space exploration, proposed agricultural development to increase world food supplies, and proposals that dry desert lakebeds be used as disposal sites for toxic wastes. Transportation, power transmission corridors and energy development sites are other issues that will be considered.

After all the data is collected and analyzed, specialists in each resource will outline objectives for their resources and develop management plans for each specific resource. The next step will involve planners and resource specialists working together to synthesize individual plans into a comprehensive draft plan. Some conflicts may be resolved through minor modifications, such as relocating a proposed campground from critical wildlife habitat. Others will generate widespread public interest and controversy, and these will be exposed to the public through the draft plan.

*Blythe Intaglio*

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## DESERT RANGERS

The first BLM desert ranger was hired in 1972, and five years later the number had risen to 27. The rangers rely on information, education, visitor assistance and persuasion to obtain compliance with regulations. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act authorized a uniformed ranger force with law enforcement authority. BLM projections indicate a need for 56 rangers ultimately. The 1976 Act also made search and rescue a mission of BLM where no other emergency services are available, a service BLM already is providing in some areas as part of its overall visitor assistance program.

## FIELD OFFICES

The Barstow Way Station, first of six planned public contact stations, was completed and opened to the public in 1974. Its interpretive facilities are informing thousands of people of the needs of the desert environment and man's relationship to the desert.

Field offices have been established at Barstow, El Centro, Ridgecrest and Bishop to put rangers and resource personnel, such as lands, minerals, range and wildlife specialists, within easy access of the desert's resources. Reduction of hazards, including abandoned mine works, and protection of cultural resources such as Indian rock art are being accomplished, frequently with the help of user groups such as off-road vehicle clubs.

A desert tortoise preserve has been established and fenced, and other areas have been identified for protection.

These and other interim management activities will continue while the comprehensive, long-range plan for the desert is being developed.

## FUNDING

The California Desert Program had its beginnings in 1967, when the initial Desert Study was undertaken at a cost of $25,000 from existing BLM funds. The first phase considered the desert recreational resources, use and potential. The second phase considered the entire desert environment and all its resources, and proposed the dual-element desert program with separate but coordinated efforts in planning and interim management. The program was launched in 1972 from within BLM's existing base appropriation. The 1976 Act authorized the appropriation of up to $40 million to carry out the Desert Program through 1980, but did not actually appropriate funds. Actual funding comes through the annual appropriation process of Bureau request, then review by the Department of the Interior, Office of Management and Budget, and Congress before funds become available.

## HISTORY

The desert program began when BLM was emerging from a largely custodial role of the public domain lands into a full multiple-use resource management agency. Widespread public involvement in the classification process under the Classification and Multiple Use Act of 1964 revealed a shift in public attitudes toward these lands, which had been retained in federal ownership "pending their final disposition." It was apparent that the public in the second half of the twentieth century wanted these lands retained in federal ownership and managed rather than parceled out piecemeal to private interests.

Retention and management of the National Resource Lands was established as national policy with passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976.

## DESERT PLANNING

Title VI of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 requires the Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Land Management, to "prepare and implement a comprehensive, long-range plan for the management, use, development and protection of the public lands within the California Desert Conservation Area."

The Act requires that the planning effort use the principles of multiple-use and sustained yield in providing for resource use and development, including maintenance of environmental quality, rights-of-way and mineral development. The deadline for completion is September 30, 1980, a short time for a project of such dimensions. The desert conservation area embraces an area the size of the states of Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire combined. It contains a wealth of natural and cultural resources.

BLM's Desert Planning Staff had begun developing a California Desert Plan before the 1976 Act was passed. Land and resource use plans called "management framework plans" had been completed for three planning units, and intensive inventories were under way in two others. The initial intensive planning program covered about 4½ million acres, leaving approximately 12 million to be completed. The total planning acreage includes several areas where National Resource Lands are intermingled with other ownerships which must be included in inventory and planning.

## PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

BLM seeks public involvement in all phases of planning and management. Many individuals have resource knowledge, such as location of springs, rockhounding areas, and historical areas, for example. Others may want to make their feelings known about how the National Resource Lands of the desert should be managed, and this input also is welcome.

A focal point of BLM's public involvement effort is the California Desert Conservation Area Advisory Committee, which was provided for in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act to assist in developing the comprehensive, long-range plan for the desert.

Public inquiries should be directed either to the Desert Planning Staff or one of the two BLM districts involved in interim management of the desert — Riverside and Bakersfield.

## DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. Administration.

## BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the Department of the Interior, is responsible for conservation, management and development of 473 million acres of National Resource Lands, 20 percent of the land area of the United States and 60 percent of all federally owned lands. In addition, BLM has administrative responsibility for public mineral resources on 369 million acres of private and other federally owned lands, and for approximately 1.1. billion acres of the Outer Continental Shelf. National Resource Lands are managed for multiple-use, including timber, minerals, livestock grazing, wildlife, watershed, wilderness and outdoor recreation.

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